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# THE ENGLISH WOMEN-HUMORISTS.

BY ALICE MEYNELL.

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THE legitimate kingdoms of comedy are three: humor, wit and derision. And, if English letters have been great in all the three, they have been conspicuous in humor and in derision; in good understanding and in burlesque; in the candid and in the ironic laugh; in the kind and the unkindest mirth. Humor and derision, for all their differences, have this in common—they make mirth of abnormal characters in man or woman; of the comic misadventure, the grimace of nature, or the whim of fortune. There is a popular phrase, “making game.” Humor and derision both make game, and make it of persons; while wit is rather amused with ideas and language. Humor is essentially human, and the well-known whimsical history of the word shows it. Every man’s “humor” was the prevalent fluid of what we now call his temperament—whether blood, or lymph, or bile, and so forth, according to the ancient physiology. His humor then is the name of his prevalent character. Next, to perceive this, to watch it, to laugh at it, took the name of humor. The transfer of the word—the act of transfer—may be caught in Ben Jonson. Social man is, in the modern phrase, “humorous”; the inflections and infractions, by others, of his social laws and by-laws (and he to look on) are the matter of his humor, his laugh—the somewhat overurged laugh of Dickens, or the slender derisive laugh of Jane Austen; for derision, too, is personal, and perhaps the most personal of the shapes of comedy. Humor and derision watch the person, face to face or askance. Wit may stroll alone, in the light of its own smiles.

In this personal and social character of derisive comedy are we to find an explanation of the truth that the comedy of women in literature is for the most part derisive? Humor is social, de-

risation is yet more social. It is social and yet exclusive. It draws close the bonds of civilization, in order the better to reach the victims of its mirthful scorn, the better to see them and to point at them the comic finger. A writer like Miss Austen, for example, who is herself tethered, has her Mrs. Bennet, her Mr. Collins, her Mrs. Elton, her Mary Musgrove, tied with the strings of custom; they are not to escape into any possible solitudes; they are absurd in the eyes of the county and the village. They are displayed within an intelligent ring giving voice to the delicate laughter of her readers. And, partly, nature made them ridiculous, but, partly also, the customs of the world, of which they were ignorant, or negligent, or imperceptive. Mrs. Bennet was not only, generally speaking, "a woman of mean understanding"; she was unable to grasp the nature of an entail. She was incapable of understanding her husband, and her husband was a man of the modern civilization of his day. He was a man with a certain property, who sat in his study, and there kept his irony dry. And an entail is a characteristic detail of social life. By the way, no better instances could be sought of humor on the one hand and of derision on the other, than the cases of two women who do not understand their husbands: Mrs. Bennet in "Pride and Prejudice," and Mrs. Tulliver in "The Mill on the Floss." Miss Austen's study of her fool is that of a bright, despising eye, amused certainly and enjoying, but animated by derision unrelaxed. Miss Austen was well aware that she made her effects by small repeated strokes. In the case of Mrs. Bennet, the repetition is the fun. The tethered Mrs. Bennet—social fool—has, as it were, to abide the iteration. One reference to the misapprehended entail would be a little ludicrous, but Mrs. Bennet is heard to make many, and the reader always applauds with a cordial laugh. Mrs. Bennet's nerves reappear, with cumulative, with progressive, effect—she is odious. The author's exquisitely moderate art, which will not do things violently, does them often; and yet only often enough; neither here is there any excess. That fine art confronts Mrs. Bennet with her husband some three or four times in the story, but all-sufficiently. The insensitive woman has entertained the cheerful and grateful reader; and then Miss Austen brings her into the study of the ironic man, and she amuses *him*. The author of "Pride and Prejudice" disapproves of that position for a husband; she tells her reader so.

None the less has she made of that household, and of the fool who is the wife in it, a masterpiece of derision.

George Eliot's fool is seen with other eyes. In the gradual history of Mrs. Tulliver's ill-luck, of the long blunder which is her whole relation—to husband, son, daughter and the unkind world—there is no phrase, no sentence, of derision. There is a vigilant, perceptive humor, with mirth in it, and with more wisdom. Of the three comedies—humor, ridicule and wit—the author of "*The Mill on the Floss*" takes two only—a rather sad humor, a perfectly exquisite wit. She says of her fool: "Mrs. Tulliver had lived thirteen years with her husband, yet she retained in all the freshness of her early married life a facility of saying those things which drove him in the opposite direction to the one she desired. Some minds are wonderful for keeping their bloom in this way." With the person of that fresh and tedious matron before our mind's eye, we have to applaud this keen phrase as a triumph of wit. George Eliot is, in fact, an exceedingly witty writer, a mistress of idea and language, as well as a human humorist. Of derision she is, I think, morally incapable.

The fact that her most humorous creatures are children is by itself a sign that she has no mockery. Children are not subjects of mockery; and yet who in the company of mankind is more humorous than a child? How distinct and different are the kingdoms of humor and derision, a child can show us. Who has derided a child? Literature does not recognize such an action. George Eliot, in whom nothing answers to the spur of the spirit of mockery, is able to banter a child. Few could use irony and yet take no kind of advantage of a child, as she does when she makes the little boy cry, and then repeat and improve upon his own lamentation. It is what children do. And the easy deliverance from the stress of emotion, even while the body is yet full of its manifestations, is so essentially childish that George Eliot found it also worth the notice of her attentive eyes. It is not observed in vain. At that little drama of childhood she sits a laughing spectator, charmed, not by something sentimental unlike the whimsical truth, but by the humor of the fact. If ever realism is thoroughly justified, by the way, it is in the art that deals with children; for they outstrip, or outflutter, or dodge, or evade our inventions, and all that we might have thought pretty, quaint or appropriate. They are unforeseen, and we are best occupied in

keeping a mere lookout. Tottie and the boys in "Adam Bede," Tessa's children in "Romola," the little Harry Transome and Job Tudge in "Felix Holt," and, strangest and freshest, perhaps, of all, the Hebrew children in "Daniel Deronda"—these are humorous children, studied in their natural humor, and in the accidents of their conditions, the conventions of their incongruous setting. Men and women have unwittingly made their children absurd—chiefly by dress; and the absurdity has a peculiar edge, and is keen to touch a certain tenderness in us all—in George Eliot certainly, as when she shows us Job Tudge's little body "in a ragged jacket, with a tail about two inches deep sticking out above the funniest of corduroys." There is not much written of this dear child in "Felix Holt"; let us extract a precious page:

"'Here's Job Tudge now,' said Felix, turning the little one round on his knee, . . . 'this little fist, that looks like a puff-ball and can hide nothing bigger than a gooseberry, will get large and bony, and perhaps want to clutch more than its share; these wide blue eyes, that tell me more truth than Job knows, will narrow and narrow and try to hide the truth that Job would be the better for not knowing; this little negative nose will become long and self-asserting; and this little tongue—put out thy tongue, Job!'—Job, awestruck under this ceremony, put out a little red tongue very timidly—'this tongue, hardly bigger than a rose-leaf, will get large and thick, wag out of season, do mischief, brag and cant for gain or vanity, and cut as cruelly, for all its clumsiness, as if it were a sharp-edged blade. Big Job will perhaps be naughty.' As Felix, speaking with the loud emphatic distinctness habitual to him, brought out this terribly familiar word, Job's sense of mystification became too painful: he hung his lip and began to cry. 'See there,' said Mrs. Holt, 'you're frightening the innocent child with such talk—and it's enough to frighten them that thinks themselves the safest.'"

The townsman of Treby Magna clothes his boy in a coat with a little tail; Tessa the Tuscan swaddles her child; the one with a grotesque effect, the other with something less ironical, but still—custom, whether in Italy or the East, does not remove the impression—with an involuntary touch of fun. The children of the Jewish family—the Cohens, behind whose pawnbroker shop Deronda found his prophet—are little portraits that pricked George Eliot's sense of the incongruous, in such slender form and degree as suit the comedy of childhood. They are Jacob, Adelaide Rebekah and the baby. They are little Hebrews, and Cockneys.

Their father is perfectly vulgar, and Oriental. The incongruity is ugly and strange. Deronda has to speak to Mordecai, and tells little Jacob that it is on a matter he cannot understand:

“‘Can you say this?’ said Jacob, immediately giving forth a string of his rote-learned Hebrew verses with a wonderful mixture of the throaty and the nasal, and nodding his small head at his hearer, with a sense of giving formidable evidence which might rather alter their mutual position. ‘No, really,’ said Deronda. ‘I thought not,’ said Jacob, performing a dance of triumph on his small scarlet legs, while he took various objects out of the deep pockets of his knickerbockers and returned them thither, as a slight hint of his resources; after which, running to the door of the workroom, he opened it wide, set his back against it, and said, ‘Mordecai, here’s the young swell,’—a copying of his father’s phrase which seemed to him well fitted to cap the recitation of Hebrew.”

This is truly a child, in spite of the adult commonness that colors his natural vanity, and George Eliot is never less than tender with her little Jew. But of the Tottie of “Adam Bede” her rich tenderness makes a comedy of delight. It is characteristic of this tenderness that she can trust herself with the comedy of old age, as well as the comedy of childhood. By the side of Job Tudge stands Mrs. Holt. She is a braggart, without malice, and a fool; but George Eliot tolerates her, and puts the little boy’s hand into her protecting palm. She, again, is a woman who does not understand a man, as is Lippeth in “Adam Bede,” and that man—by a common irony of child-bearing—her son.

Felix Holt will neither live nor let his mother live by the sale of a “cancer cure”:

“‘When everybody gets their due, and people’s doings are spoke of on the house-tops . . . it’ll be known what I’ve gone through with those medicines—the pounding, and the pouring, and the letting stand, and the weighing—up early and down late—there’s nobody knows yet but One that’s worthy to know; and the pasting o’ the printed labels right side upwards.’”

Admirable is the little scene of Mrs. Holt’s intrusion into the hall of the Transomes’ house:

“Mrs. Holt’s attention, having been directed to the squirrel which had scampered on to the head of the Silenus carrying the infant Bacchus, had been drawn to the tiny babe looked at with so much affection by the rather ugly and hairy gentleman, of whom she nevertheless spoke with reserve as of one who possibly belonged to the Transome family.”

The sweet mother in "Silas Marner" is also humorous; so is the old Florentine who lets Tessa's child go astray; so is she whose false braids are snatched for the bonfire by the young angels of Fra Girolamo's march against the vanities. But George Eliot does not deride even her; she gravely disapproves the braids, deprecates them, and with Romola's voice teaches the woman a better ideal of beauty. Humorous children, besides, make possible George Eliot's humorous dogs, and undoubtedly there is a natural joke in many a dog.

Was it a true saying (hazarded but now) that literature had not committed the baseness of deriding children, or of mocking them with the comedy of ridicule? In an early "Sketch," Dickens comes near it, and Thackeray has some odious children, in "Philip" and in "Lovel the Widower." They are little snobs, formed by their parents, but Thackeray makes them personally and individually detestable, braggart, pharisaic, vulgar, fatuous and worldly. And they are comic. I think no woman-humorist has such children in any book. Miss Austen does not banter any children, but she disapproves of a certain number, assigning, with great propriety, the responsibility for their troublesome characters to the mothers who "spoil" them. It is all very seriously, though slightly, done, and therefore not within the present subject. Those were serious times; and Miss Ferrier is as inflexible as Miss Austen. Decidedly, Susan Ferrier should have her place among the humorists. This Scottish novelist of somewhat later date than Miss Austen wasted much of her powers in romance—the costume-romance of the day, in which the hero speaks "with increasing agitation." If any one reads her now, it is for her humor, which—albeit with a little rollick all her own—weakly resembles that of much finer authors; for, like Miss Austen, she works by the iteration of little touches. Obviously, this is the method that acts admirably when the absurdity of the character is a matter of repetition. What Miss Austen does in derision with Mrs. Bennet, Miss Ferrier does in good humor with her Miss Pratt. Miss Pratt talks about one Anthony Whyte. It is not in itself very humorous to tell anecdotes of an absent and unknown Anthony, whereas Miss Austen, with the woman who complains of the entail, and the woman who "explores" in her barouche-landau, starts with something perfectly comic. Thus there is no equality in the two humorists. But, such as it is,

Miss Ferrier's comedy is well played. Custom never succeeds in preparing the reader for the freshness of irrelevancy of another and yet another anecdote of Anthony Whyte. You take the tediousness with progressive pleasure. He never appears in person, and his name ceases only with Miss Pratt. A dull Lord Rossville is not quite successful at the first description, but he shapes well in dialogue. "'Be composed,' repeated he again after a pause, his own composure becoming more and more heavy." "He was a stranger," says Miss Ferrier, "to *ennui*." Her derision is sometimes crude enough; but the following passage might have been written by Jane Austen:

"Miss St. Clair was engaged with her cousins, one of whom talked much of balls, and officers, and poetry; but as the children entered she sighed, and said there was an end to all rational conversation."

Then comes an older prattler:

"Poor Miss Mary, what a pretty creature she was once; but she has taken rather a religious turn now—to be sure, when people have lost the use of their legs, what can they do? I'm sure we ought to be thankful that we have all our faculties."

And there is some happy Scotch dialect; the good and serviceable female friend of a needy family speaks:

"Then the baby had a sad tow't with its teeth; and the lass that takes care of the bairns she burnt her hand, and was not able to part them when they fought one another. I really thought Archie and Duncan would have raggit the very heads off one another, poor things."

Fanny Burney has no wit, and little humor, and her derision is no more than farcical. What is there, after all, in the comedy of her novels? Grant her that the Brangtons were the earliest of many families of vulgar relations that have put heroines to the blush in the novels of women. The modern Cockney seems to begin with one of the Brangtons in "Evelina." That family have a twang as it were before their time. For the rest of the humor Fanny Burney depends upon derision in its raw state. The elderly, the female, the fat, are upset at the wayside, nearly frightened to death, and held up, helpless, to the ferocity of farce. Besides, the derision is tedious. When Madame Duval has satisfied the horse-laugh, you are expected to have chuckles left for M. Dubois and the Captain. The little author seems to enjoy it, but her enjoyment is importunate. Here again is repetition—



there would be no joke, or little, without it; but Miss Burney's touches, though small, though weak, are not delicate. Vivacious to boisterousness and always dull, little Burney, as a comic writer, deserves a thousand deaths.

We go back now, a generation, from the humorist to the wit. When the spiritual imagination of English literature fled away upon some wandering wind, at the dying of the seventeenth century, there had been hardly a sigh of premonition. It was away, as though the seventeen strokes of the century clock had rung a recognized and inevitable hour of farewell. The diction of the wintry age took deliberate voice as the century changed. The suns and moons of poets were gone, and in their stead we had, from 1700 onwards, "purity of style." Purity of style, like simplicity, is of two kinds—one negatively and one positively admirable. And even the negatively pure is not without its value. Turning with dismay from Steele's tragedy, we make haste to recommend purity of style to the men of the eighteenth century. For the small fancy and the little heart that are theirs can ill endure the liberty and also the responsibility of an unguarded language; they scold, and, with an outcry, mimic the passions of men, when they think themselves called to violence. Steele's tragedy is lamentable; Addison's "sublime" verse is lamentable; but they both had purity of style in the little things within their competence; and, in her place—which she, at any rate, never forsook—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was Addisonian. It is not a little astonishing, with what small things we may learn to be not merely content, but happy, in the work of this English classic author. Even her wit—despoil it of its well-taught graces of restricted phrase, and of its own self-applause,—and is there anything left that would be worth turning in another manner? No other authors so persuade you, in good faith, to take them at their own valuing as do these men and women of the early eighteenth century. It is their peculiar pretension to do thus. Some writers have given their work to what judgment Heaven pleased; and others have pressed urgently to find a way to the reader's apprehension by any means, upon the reader's own terms. But in 1720, by mere confidence, they school us to their commonplace, in order to surprise us with their wit; and they succeed. Take, for example, Lady Mary's pleasantry in regard to the disputing ladies of Ratisbon society:

"I know that my peaceable disposition gives me a very ill figure, and that 'tis *publicly* whispered as a piece of impertinent pride in me that I have hitherto been saucily civil to everybody, as if I thought no-body good enough to quarrel with."

How pretty is this, and how willing we are to take it, with the writer's classic fatuity, as something of the best kind of irony! We become simple (with a simplicity like that named by the rustic who calls the village idiot "simple"), our taste grows pure as blankness is pure, and we take Lady Mary's little delicacy upon our tongue not without sweetness. Again, in the letter from Vienna, which gives her London friend a report of the admiration offered on the Continent to beauties approaching the years of Helen or of Cleopatra:

"I don't know what your ladyship may think of this matter, but it is a considerable comfort to me to know there is upon earth such a paradise for old women, and I am content to be insignificant at present, in the design of returning when I am fit to appear nowhere else. I cannot help lamenting on this occasion the pitiful case of too many English ladies, long since retired to prudery and ratafia, whom if their stars had luckily conducted hither, would still shine in the first rank of beauties."

Any reader loving delicate prose, for its own sake, will make haste to forego his sense of intellectual comedy, and to protest that the matter here is worthy of the animated manner and of the classic grammar, for the grammar is elegantly correct. On the other hand, we are so sure that Lady Mary was incapable of great wit, that the splendor of the invective in some of the couplets on Pope startles us when they are printed as her work. Harvey was part author, however, and beyond question those couplets are his and not hers. Humor and wit apart, Lady Mary saw nothing in the East or the West that a woman of imagination would have seen. Who shall say that imagination had not forsaken the ways of literature? Lady Mary is on her road to Adrianople and, for nearly the first time, a "landskip" gets a phrase of commendation. The country, with its vines, was gay and flourishing in her eyes, but as a thoughtful traveller she adds:

"This climate, happy as it seems, can never be preferred to England, with all its frosts and snows, while we are blessed with an easy government, under a King who makes his own happiness consist in the liberty of his people, and chooses to be looked upon rather as their father than their master. The theme would carry me far."

So would almost any platitude. Thus she hurries, from a scene in which the light and color must have been those of visions, to a George. The liveliness which is, in common report, but another name for Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, is at its best when the customs of a Court are to be described in their minor differences, but the liveliness at its best is paltry. Nor would it be possible to a richer nature or to richer eyes. In her travels she sets to work with a peculiar self-possession to describe the architecture of any building of splendor, and exercises her cold taste in the report, very much as Miss Austen, a century thereafter, was wont to cast a judicial eye upon the "disposition of wood and water" within the dominions of a landowner. Both have a kind of professional rapidity in appraising the matter, with the consciousness of correct views.

Jane Austen's views of family history are equally deliberate:

"The family of Dashwood had long been settled in Sussex. Their estate was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of the property, where, for many generations, they had lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance."

How would a modern novelist who begins by an impressionary sentence, without a verb as like as not, endure to be compelled, by decorum, to go to work with such an initial sentence? He would never recover his "spirit." Miss Austen is quite sure of herself and of her reader. He consents to read her dull opening, and to endure the exceeding dowdiness of her unmusical words, because he knows that in the course of a page or two the Dashwoods will be deprived of some of the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance. Sport will be made of some of the Dashwoods, the author's derisive humor being equal to that of her kin, the earlier Philistines.

That Jane Austen works upon very small matters is hardly worth a complaint. Things are assuredly not trivial because they are small, but that which makes life, art, work trivial is triviality of relations.

Mankind lives by vital relations. With Miss Austen the relations of love, vengeance, devotion, duty, maternity, sacrifice, are trivial. There is also a perpetual relation of watchfulness, of prudence. As her persons watch one another, so does she watch them, mimicking. She realizes their colds (her female charac-

ters easily take cold), so that one seems to hear her recording them in muffled accents—but not precisely because of her sympathy. Triviality of relations amongst her persons does not prevent a kind of intensity. Lying and spite amongst the women work at close quarters. With the men we hear of a somewhat wider range: there is, in the case of one justly rejected suitor, a suspicion, a rumor, of Sunday travelling; the accusation is not exactly brought home. But the touches of her art are not invariably small; they are trivial, but they are now and then as honestly exaggerated as those of the inferior humorists: for example, “Lady Middleton resigned herself with all the philosophy of a well-bred woman, contenting herself with merely giving her husband a gentle reprimand on the subject five or six times every day.” But it is by her own reiteration that she produces a much finer effect with her Mr. Woodhouse, in whose eyes every woman having the good luck to marry out of his tedious house is a “poor dear.” His compassion makes excellent sport by measure of cumulation. The author’s patience and vigilance never suffer an opportunity to escape, where she might repeat the turn of his phrase, the tone of his words. And the whole would advance by slow degrees, and close in a little masterpiece, but for the pains the author takes to tell the reader that of which she is later to convince him. She informs him at the outset of what he would have perceived at the end. I know her art is called faultless; nevertheless, this is, I believe, a fault.

As to the triviality to which she dedicates that fine art, let no one who has not read “*Pride and Prejudice*” and “*Emma*” say that he knows worldliness in its own proper home. There, “engaging the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintance” (a mouthful, this, of thick words), worldliness keeps its peculiar state. There is, in almost every second page of Miss Austen’s works, a paltry thing called “consequence.” No slang of our own time has ever misused a word more foolishly. To “consequence,” and to the heroine’s love of it, is sacrificed all that might have seemed the beginning of spirituality.

The mansion of “consequence” is a country house unmusically described:

“Cleveland was a spacious, modern-built house, situated on a sloping lawn. The pleasure-grounds were moderately extensive; and, like every other place of the same degree of importance, it had its open shrubbery,

and closer wood walk; a road of smooth gravel winding round a plantation led to the front."

To the shrubbery—one can see the unlovable conifers—the heroines betook themselves in any "hurry of spirits" or other limited form of emotion. In and out of the modern-built house pottered the men, the men of so strange a sex. On the smooth gravel drove "consequence." Emma had the following hesitation about a youth she was inclined to admire (she was twenty-one):

"Of pride, indeed, there was perhaps scarcely enough; his indifference to a confusion of rank bordered too much on inelegance of mind. He could be no judge, however, of the evil he was holding cheap."

Of the irony of which I have said so much these are keen examples: "Who could tell"—Miss Austen is presenting to us the thoughts of Mrs. John Dashwood in regard to her unwelcome guests, her sisters-in-law—"that they might not expect to go out with her a second time? The power of disappointing them, it was true, must always be hers. But that was not enough." This describes the joys of a young woman, lately married: "They passed some months in great happiness at Dawlish; for she had many relations and old acquaintance to cut." And this phrase dismisses the inconstant Mr. Willoughby: "His wife was not always out of humor; and in his breed of horses and dogs, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity." She sharpens her pen to deal with a little girl of three. Children are no subject of hers as children; they are her subject as spoilt children, through whom the maternal fool inflicts annoyance upon women of sense. So near to the humanity, upon which her watch is kept, does she peer, but she finds no cause of tenderness.

It is, on the other hand, unthinkable that George Eliot should laugh at a hypocrite or banter a fool of any degree, even of those slight degrees that beset the daily life of social man. She is further removed than any of her race from the temper of our remoter fathers who found insanity, imbecility, humpbacks and lameness comic, and from that of our nearer ancestors who, with Dickens and Molière, found a jest in the hypocrite. The will and resolution of the hypocrite are tragic matter. His slighter acts may be matter of comedy, but the humorists did not stop at these. They plucked out the heart of his sinister mystery. For sooner or later they turned grave, and brought the pretender to chastisement, and cast a disquieting effect upon the laugh they had

raised. Mr. Pecksniff's ways give us joyous amusement, so long as we are permitted to ignore the hypocrite's self-knowledge, resolution and will; but when the author turns vindictive, you remember your laughter with some dismay. You leave Dickens to do the final horsewhipping—it cannot right him or you. No, the hypocrite at whom you can laugh freely must be half-hearted. Or the author who presents him must know how to close the door leading to the outer darkness, so that he and his reader may make merry together within the comfortable limits of a convention. The egoist generally stands much apart from the hypocrite by reason of unconsciousness, and I think the humor, the derision and the wit of comedy may have their appropriate play with almost all degrees of egoism well on the hither side of Nietzsche.

Mrs. Trollope was held to be a leading humorist—"vulgar, but unquestionably humorous," the brief mention of her in the history of English fiction would generally aver. Her "Widow Barnaby" still knocks about the bookstalls in the commonest of cheap editions. Its whole motive is the derision of the grotesque figure of a widow overdressed. The author never tires of a detail in that image of a fool. But, with the very ferocity of burlesque, she makes it the image not merely of an egoist, but of a consciously cruel woman. With what heart does the author laugh open-mouthed at her widow's bonnets, ingeniously mismatch her colors, count her cheese-cakes, repeat her beer, do over again all those ignominious things that depend on their cumulative value for their effect, and yet make her tragically cruel? Nor does Mrs. Trollope defer the seriousness of the moral situation, as Dickens does more or less. At an early page, and long before that sedulous work upon the caps and colors, long before those scenes at the pastry-cook's and over the supper-tray—the assiduous burlesque whereby Mrs. Trollope adds, page by page, coats of paint to her Mrs. Barnaby—she brutally tells the schemings, the hate and revenge. She shows you a woman with the hope of a relative's death in her heart, and takes a humorist's joy in the woman's shopping. Nor is this done with the central or principal fool only. There is a Miss Betsy, somewhat more delicately formed than Mrs. Trollope's images are wont to be, a woman whose judicious charities are praised, and who befriends, rescues and enriches the lovely niece and victim of the widow. Of this woman we are told at the outset: "For years, Miss Betsy looked

forward with hope for one of two desired events. That most coveted was the death of her sister-in-law." Mrs. Trollope was, perhaps, a humorist. But human humor has undergone some revision, and will undergo yet more. She is, let us allow, ingenious enough. "'I'm sure,'" says Mrs. Barnaby, "'I would no more let my poor dear sister's child go out with me if I was shabbily dressed than I would fly.'" So saying, she buys herself some new lace and gives the old *crêpe* to her niece. A little less, and this might be almost art. As it is, the modern reader is hardly indebted to "The Widow Barnaby" for a smile. The wretched widow's merited misfortunes grow tedious. She is not only jilted, in which derision finds its account; she is robbed, which is less grave, yet also less funny. The men who make love to her are not only fortune-hunters, but felons. Some of the early humorist's ferocity is proved here too. She is made to fall down a bank, with one of the felons, a "major," upon her. And some of Miss Austen's mundane temper dwells in this inferior author of a later generation. There is a middle-class security of exclusiveness, a grave integrity of worldliness, in the good people. The possession of money gives to Miss Betsy (the excellent woman who had for years wished for the birth of the child or the death of the mother) a final triumph over the poor wretch who had dressed beyond her income. Miss Betsy had been saving and hoarding while the widow had been falling a victim to imitation majors. Therefore, Miss Betsy is able to set up a sudden carriage, and there the story culminates. This book—cheapened on railway bookstalls, but virtually forgotten—has another rather interesting likeness; it is in touch with the picaresque novel. In the picaresque novel the hero goes to seek adventures. Thus does Mrs. Barnaby. The later hero and heroine sit among friends and find their fortunes on the spot; the older set forth and make it among strangers.

To go back again into the eighteenth century, let us ask what would befall if a manager of to-day should "revive" Elizabeth Inchbald's farce? It held the stage as late as the days of Dickens. "'Animal Magnetism' will go," he writes, "with a greater laugh than anything else . . . I have seen people laugh at the piece until they have hung over the front of the boxes like ripe fruit." As for her judgment: "Talking of vanity," said Byron nearly half a century earlier, "whose praise do I prefer? Why, Mrs.

Inchbald's." This charming woman is incorrectly described by Colman as "solemnly dedicated to virtue and a garret." She was gayly dedicated to those things; she merrily suffered hunger and cried with cold in order to keep from a peevish sister all privation. She had great success, and celebrated one of her triumphs as a playwright by a game at blindman's buff with John Kemble. She spied a crowd waiting outside the theatre door; her diary says: "Dined, drank tea, and supped with Mrs. Whitfield. At dark she and I and her son William walked out. I rapped at doors in New Street and King Street, and ran away." In the "garret" she looked a great deal at herself in the glass, and noted with grief the wrinkles growing in the face she confessed to be "full of spirit and sweetness." She had no other trouble, she says, for some years. The "virtue," moreover, was as gay as the "garret." Her dress was seldom worth so much as eightpence, but always becoming, she says. She was very susceptible, and—what is not always the same thing—affectionate; and her heart was often touched; "Madam, would you have had me?" asked John Kemble, and she answered with her stammer, "Dear heart, I'd have j-j-jumped at you." In her novels she was on her best behavior; her heroines do not jump. If I dwell for a moment on her "Simple Story," it is rather for a demonstration of what a woman can do *without* humor, derision, or wit. This heroine, then—a fairly careful search has not made me acquainted with the maidenly secret of her Christian name. She is Miss Milner until she becomes Lady Elmwood, and then she reminds her husband of the time when she was his dear Miss Milner. There is also Lady Matilda, her daughter, whose title obliges the disclosure of her Christian name. She is greatly distressed at having been surprised into the confession of an attachment. "Could Lord Elmwood," she says, alluding to her father, "know for what he sent me?" "He did," replied the suitor; "I boldly told him of my presumptuous love, and he has given you alone the power over my happiness or misery. Oh, do not doom me to the latter." Lady Matilda does not doom him to the latter; but Mrs. Inchbald can hardly bring herself to say so. Romance apart, "the divine Elizabeth Inchbald" is so light-hearted a figure in literature that it might be necessary to make a fourth class of women-humorists for her sake, and to rank them, not threefold, but fourfold, for humor, derision, wit and gayety.



Had Charlotte Brontë humor? Had Emily? The bitterness of derision Charlotte has, but not the hilarity; wit is not in her world; humor flutters for a moment in the flying vital figure of M. Paul in "Villette"; but there is neither humor nor derision in the Mrs. Yorke of "Shirley," nor anything that really reaches our sense of humor or derision in the Curates. Emily Brontë, in the old farm-servant of "Wuthering Heights," has a measure of humor, but she is never in quest of it.

And now, how little French literature—at which it is not within my present purpose to glance—would add to the sum of feminine comedy; or how far it would be from raising the wit, the humor or the derision of the comedy of women by a single degree, that reader might be slow to believe who cherishes the name of Frenchwoman as a proverb for articulate animation. Madame de Sévigné, the wit, has no linear posterity. And where are the mockers, where are the humorists? If they are to seek, many a Frenchwoman would yet be admitted into the fourth order—the order of gayety, with all its perils. And what are the perils of that irresponsible and hardly literary place? Why, the perils of dulness itself. For vivacity that is not vitality is the insignificance incident to women.

Alice Meynell.